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ABSTRACT

Dutch secondary schools offer educational programs on four tracks, vocational and nonvocational. At the end of each program, a final examination is administered, with the test content areas determined by law, by the schools, and by the student's individual program. Assessment is by means of a written, nationally administered exam and locally-determined measures such as written papers, tests, and projects. In most cases, grading of the national exams is a combination of absolute and relative grading, based on the need for comparison with national norms and the need to assess individual progress. The government has proposed that national and school assessments have more distinctive and different objectives. However, various new government proposals for changes in the secondary school system would also have implications for the assessment system. In the case of both native and foreign language testing, influences come from more than one side. The current combination of a national reading comprehension test and local tests of writing, listening, and speaking would be significantly affected by the proposed curriculum change at the same time that foreign language testing in general is taking new approaches to assessment. (MSE)

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Final Language Examinations in Secondary Education: the Dutch System

Trude A. Maas

The purpose of this paper is to give a picture of the actual situation with regard to the secondary school-leaving examinations in The Netherlands and of the proposals that have been made to change some aspects of the system. After a general view we will concentrate on the examinations of languages in particular.

The Dutch system of secondary schools

Pupils transfer at 12 plus to one of four kinds of secondary school. Who goes where is determined by the headmaster's assessment, wishes of the parents and, sometimes, an aptitude test. There are several possibilities to transfer from one type of secondary school to another if pupils develop in a different way as was expected at the age of 12. Orientation years before the final choice are common. Some secondary schools contain all four secondary types of education. The four types of secondary school are:

- VWO: six-year pre-university schools leading to diplomas entitling pupils to enter University. *Atheneums* concentrate on 'modern' subjects and *Gymnasiums* on classics.
- Havo: Five-year general secondary schools (higher level), whose final exams give pupils access to higher vocational institutions such as teacher training colleges, colleges of education, agricultural and technical institutions.
- Mavo: three or four-year general secondary schools (intermediate level), leading to intermediate vocational institutions.
- LBO: four-year lower vocational schools.

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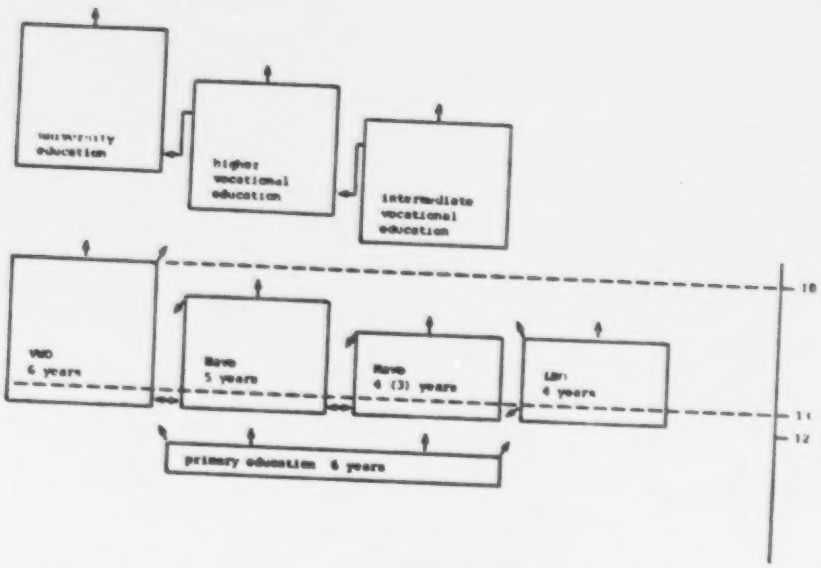


At the end of each of the secondary schools described above, an examination is held.
In how many and which subjects the pupil will be examined is determined during the school career of each individual pupil.
Each of the secondary schools starts with a common programme for all pupils, comprising a large variety of subjects. After several years the pupil has to make a decision about the subjects he will concentrate on, and in which he chooses to be examined at his final examination. The choice between the different subjects is not completely free. The law prescribes for each type of school in how many subjects a pupil will be examined and which subjects are obligatory. For example every pupil has to be examined in his mothertongue and at least one foreign language.
Other restrictions on the choice of the subjects are caused by the demands of the tertiairy educational institutions. Some vocational schools are rather strict as regards the subjects pupils should have in their examination package if they want to present themselves for further vocational schooling. This means that a number of important decisions concerning the future after-secondary school career of a pupil are made one or two years before leaving secondary school.

The assessment procedure

The assessment of pupils for the secondary school certificates is divided into two separate procedures: assessment by means of written, nationally administered examinations and assessment on a local level by the individual school with various means: written papers, tests, project work etc. The results of the two

assessment procedures are averaged for purposes of certification.

The executive responsibility for setting nationally administered examination papers and standards rests with special Committees of Examiners, appointed by the Department of Education. These Committees turn to CITO for help because the Committees do not have the time or the necessary knowledge and experience to develop examination papers for the subject they are charged with that ensure some reliability of judgement. CITO in its turn is commissioned by the Committee of Examiners to write examination papers for the subject in question. CITO then establishes a writing committee, consisting of three experienced teachers. These committees work under the supervision of a CITO-staff-member. Rough drafts of papers have to be submitted to the Committees of Examiners for approval.

CITO also provides the schools with machine scorable answer sheets in those cases that pre-coded answers (Multiple choice etc.) are used. In those cases where open-ended or essay questions are used, the committee charged with the writing of the papers also draws up fairly detailed instructions for marking the papers. In these cases the papers are marked by the pupils' own teacher. This is then checked by a colleague of another school, as the so called 'second marker'. There is no central check on the way in which the markers have used the instructions while doing their work.

In the cases that pre-coded answers are used, CITO scores the answer sheets mechanically and provides the raw scores of the pupils.

Those raw scores are reported to the Committee of Examiners for the purpose of setting standards and establishing grades. In the case of teacher marked papers, data are collected to fulfil the role of raw scores.

The grading is in most cases a compromise between absolute and relative grading. Although certain standards are set by the Committee of Examiners before the results of the pupils are known, the expected percentage of insufficient marks is also taken into consideration.

This picture of the final examinations surely raises certain questions. First there is the big difference between teacher and machine rating. In some subjects we have an objective testing system, for other subjects the teacher is an important factor in grading the pupils. This draws the attention to a certain ambiguity in the whole system: does the teacher have to play an important role in the decision to give a pupil his final certificate or doesn't he? As we have already seen, the image is hybrid, for certain subjects the teacher is an important intermediary, for other subjects he doesn't have any influence in the pupils' marks. We think this ambiguity is made possible by the indistinctness of the function of final examinations. In its recent publication on the policy to be developed in the field of final examinations, the Department of Education formulates no fewer than 8 possible functions examinations can have:

A to select and allocate pupils

B to qualify pupils
C to predict future success in schools
D to guarantee educational standards
E to enable the Government to 'manage' education
F to operationalize educational objectives
G to socialize pupils
H to measure the effect of teaching

It will be clear that the first four functions are relevant to the level of the individual pupil and that the other four functions have more to do with the Government's task to manage the educational system in the most general way. Now we realize that the actual differences between the different examination forms are caused by a different emphasis on one or more of the 8 functions of examinations. It will be clear that an examination that pretends to operationalize all the educational objectives will be different from one that aims mainly at predicting future success in education or society in a reliable way.
CITO's problem in writing examination papers is the fact that the Government had not as yet given clear directions about the functions of examinations that should be focused on. So the decision about the contents of an examination paper and the kind of marking to be used is taken subject by subject, by the Committee in question. There is no question of a guideline on a national level in this matter.

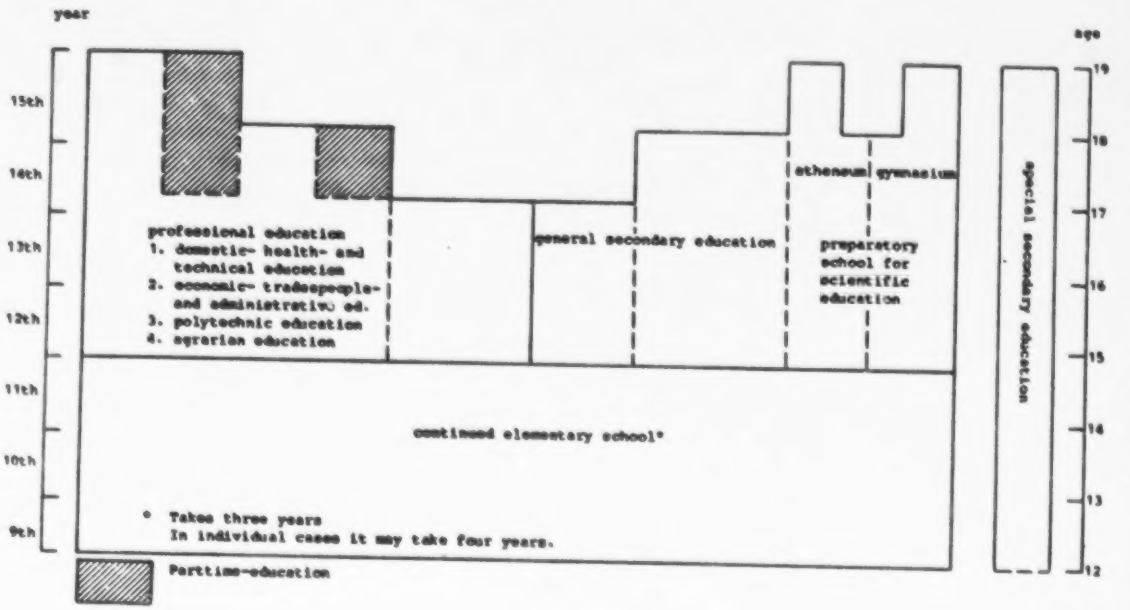
In its recent Examennota though, the Government is proposing some main lines for future development.
In the first place, it is proposed to make a distinction between the school assessment and the central examination. In the central examination the Government wants to stress the management functions, while the school assessment should reflect the teaching that has been done during the schooling period. This would mean that the final examination should measure the centrally relevant part of the objectives while the school assessment should reflect the specific way this particular school has dealt with the objectives. By this measure a teacher could make school assessment tests that closely follow the training in the classroom. So the school assessment could be different from school to school.
In his Examennota the Minister draws the only logical conclusion that follows from this proposal: in the final certification the mark for the school assessment and that for the central examination should be shown separately. No more averageing will take place if these propositions are accepted by Parliament.

Comprehensive secondary school: final examination?

So far I have described the present situation with regard to final examinations and the problem it gives for people involved in the production of the examination papers. As in most other West-European countries systems, we have in the Netherlands at present a rather heated discussion about proposals made by several consecutive governments for a system of comprehensive secondary schools.

This paper is not meant to repeat all the pros and cons the participants in the actual discussions use, so I will limit my contribution to this conference to a general view of the implications the actual Departmental proposals would have for the present certification system.

The structure of the continuation education according to the note: 'Onwards from elementary education'.



As you see on this schema, the new system would bring us one school for all 12 to 15 year old pupils. The actual secondary schools will only remain in the second phase of the secondary schooling: the 'upper' school. At the end of this 'second phase' of secondary schooling the situation with regard to examinations will probably remain comparable to the actual situation we have described in the beginning of this paper.
But there will be a break in the pupil's career at the age of 15. Pupils have to make a choice between the different possibilities in the second phase.
The present minister has stated that he does not want this break to be marked by centrally administered tests. Two reasons are given of this view: any form of selection, even at the end of the first phase of the secondary school, would be in contradiction of the present minister's view on the essentials of comprehensive secondary schools: the inevitable backwash effect of centrally administered examinations would be contrary to the social-pedagogical ideals of comprehensive schooling. The minister stresses there should be some kind of pupil centered evaluation and counseling but he also stresses the fact that the school itself should take the complete responsibility for this evaluation procedure.
On the other hand the minister doesn't want the Government to neglect its task of caring for the quality of secondary schooling. This brings him to proposing some system of quality control of comprehensive schools, centered on the school as a unity rather than on the learning results of individual pupils.
This strict separation of the different functions that are now all fulfilled by final examinations, implicates a changing view on the function of final examinations. As the proposals of the minister are very recent, I cannot at this moment give you a clear exposé on CITO's view on the development described. We hope to have some time for reflection and study the solutions that have been found in other countries for comparable problems. With regard to this the contribution of Mr Lindblad to this conference is most meaningful to us at this very moment.

Language examinations

Several contributions to this conference are centered on the content of foreign language testing and the testing of the mother-tongue. I will now limit myself to a general view on those examinations, and give you some outlines of developments to be expected in this field.

For any of the languages the pupil chooses to be tested on, the examination is divided into 2 parts: the centrally administered test of reading comprehension and the testing of the 3 other language skills: writing, listening and speaking, a testing that is fully administered by each school itself. The final mark is the average of the school and the central grading. So the central reading comprehension test determines 50% of the pupil's final mark.
The reading comprehension test used for the mother-tongue differs from the ones used for the foreign languages.

Mrs Samson has drawn your attention to the foreign language reading comprehension test, and Mr Kreeft and Mr Sanders will inform you in further detail about the centrally administered testing of the mother-tongue.
I will discuss the more general context of those tests.
As I have told you, the whole system of the division of the testing into a part left to the responsibility of the teachers and a central part is more and more the subject of discussion.
If the trend towards a clear distinction between the functions of the two different examination situations persists, the actual situation with regard to language examining might change. If the school assessment is to have another function than the central examination, there is no reason to persist in reserving certain skills for school-made tests. If the school tests are to reflect the school curriculum and the particular choices a certain school has made within the (nationally fixed) curriculum, the school tests should represent all the past learning activities, without exception for any language skill.
The function of the central examination would then be to check whether the more general objectives prescribed on a national level have been reached. And again, if general objectives are to be described for the 4 skills, the central examination should be representative for all of them. Of course this will place us before the problem of constructing reliable tests for the productive skills too. A problem not so very easy to solve. But it would be the ultimate consequence of the philosophy presented in the minister's Examennota.

So we are faced in this case with possible changes in examinations, resulting from a more general educational philosophy.

But in the case of language we experience other changes these days. You are all familiar with what is called nowadays the notional functional approach in defining language objectives. The actual use of language is getting more and more attention in the setting up of curricula.
Since the Council of Europe has published its first studies on this approach, and I now refer especially to Van Ek's Threshold Level, published in 1975*, the influence of the new approach has not stopped to increase. This means that the foreign language curricula as we have known until now will give rise to some critical questions. The one critical remark I would like to draw your attention to at this moment is the question whether we can continue to define foreign language objectives fundamentally in terms of skills. It seems that the 4-skills approach is losing some ground, especially in those situations where it was used in its most strict way. We all realise now that in an actual communication situation especially speaking and listening are closely interdependent. We, as testconstructors, see ourselves faced with the problem to develop new test-procedures that have a higher content validity with regard to the new accents in objectives than our present tests have, and that are on the other hand at least as reliable as the present ones.
Up to this moment the notional-functional approach has

had most of its influence in didactics and the setting up of curricula, and we are only at the beginning of the discussion that will surely follow: the critical review of the content of our present language examination.

I hope I have made clear to you that our examinations are subject to influence from different sides. On the one hand the educational system can never be regarded as a static system, on the contrary, it follows the moves of the society in which it functions. On the other hand the subjects taught in secondary schools are also liable to change.

I hope that meetings like this help us by the confrontation of ideas to find the optimal approach to the solution of the problems outlined in this paper, especially with regard to the form and content of language testing.

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* Van Ek, Threshold Level in a European unit/credit system for modern language learning by adults. Council of Europe Straatsburg 1975.